

(See Back)
CBS MORNING NEWS CBS TV

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Intelligence Committees; Mail Opening

MORTON: The House Intelligence Committee meets today to discuss Henry KISSINGER's refusal to give it a memo on U.S. handling of the Cyprus crisis.

And the Senate committee begins public hearings on the CIA's practice of reading mail to and from Americans abroad. Daniel Schorr reports.

STAT DANIEL SCHORR: When the FBI in 1958 got the idea of reading mail from Russia, it ran into the CIA which had been doing it for six years. The CIA owned up and cut the FBI in on the operation. When the CIA finally got around in 1961 to telling a Postmaster General what it was doing in the Post Office, J. Edward DAY, a KENNEDY appointee, was quoted as saying that it was okay to continue but he didn't want to know details. When the CIA's Inspector General in 1960 found out what was going on, he didn't react with horror but recommended getting a cover story ready in case the project was blown. Later it was decided no cover story could cover an outright criminal offense. And so it was suggested that they have a scapegoat ready to blame for tampering with the mails.

The ROCKEFELLER Commission has plowed through this ground, but for the next three days the Senate Intelligence Committee wants to do it in public with live principals, from ex-CIA Director Richard HELMS to ex-Postmasters General DAY and John GRONOUSKI. It promises some new disclosures. And anyway it's something to do while the committee haggles with the White House about how to hold public hearings on super secret electronic surveillance, a subject that was censored out of the ROCKEFELLER report. Daniel Schorr, CBS News, Washington.

HUGHES RUDD: CIA Director William COLBY was in New York City last night for a speech to the Navy League. And he took out after congressional investigations of the intelligence community, saying they're intended to amuse or even amaze the public.

CIA DIRECTOR WILLIAM COLBY: We are about to have our fifth rerun of the great mail reading story. It first appeared in my testimony; before CIA's oversight committees last January and February. I said that we had reviewed

and terminated this activity in 1973. It's second playing was in the ROCKEFELLER Commission report. This was followed by a tv spectacular featuring Mrs. ABZUG's indignation. The Post Office and Civil Service Commission of the House of Representatives then reviewed it. And this week the Senate Select Committee will repeat the performance in greater detail on live tv.

NBC NIGHTLY NEWS NBC-TV
7:00 PM OCTOBER 22

2

CIA and Mail Opening

JOHN CHANCELLOR: Richard HELMS, former Director of the CIA, told the Senate Intelligence Committee today that the agency did open the mail of American citizens illegally. And HELMS added, we were trying to get on with our job. He said that job was to protect the United States from Soviet spies. HELMS questioning followed that of three men who once headed the Postal Service. Ford Rowan reports.

FORD ROWAN: Three former Postmasters General testified that they were not told about the CIA's illegal mail opening operations. Although CIA records indicate that two of them, Winton BLUNT and Edward DAY, had been briefed on the project, they insisted they were not told, and anyway they didn't think it was all that bad.

WINTON BLUNT (?): I didn't know then and I don't know now that what the CIA was doing was illegal.

EDWARD DAY: My feeling then and my feeling now is that the CIA had overall powers that put them in a different situation than other people.

SENATOR: I must say the testimony I've heard from you Mr. DAY and you Mr. BLUNT scares me more than I expected to be. Because not only you found gross and unconscionable interference with the mail which threatens the civil liberties of every American, but we have the testimony of two former postmasters generals that they don't think it's wrong even today.

BLUNT: That was not my attitude and I deplore that attitude...

SENATOR: And I commend...

BLUNT: I think anyone in government that runs an agency has the responsibility of finding anything going on in that agency -- and I am (unintelligible) that the system is such that what happened could happen.

ROWAN: Former CIA Director Richard HELMS testified that he believes he told President JOHNSON about the illegal mail opening operation in 1967. HELMS said his memory is foggy, but he thinks JOHNSON nodded his head, shrugged his shoulders, and said, you go right ahead. HELMS said he didn't worry about the fact that it was illegal. He said, we were trying to get on with our job, I'm not a lawyer so I let it go at that.